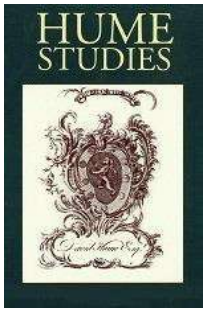

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Précis of *Hume's True Scepticism*

DONALD C. AINSLIE

In *Hume's True Scepticism* (hereafter "HTS"), I offer a new interpretation of David Hume's epistemology and philosophy of mind as presented in *A Treatise of Human Nature*.[1] I approach this task by developing what I take to be the first comprehensive[2] investigation of Part 4 of Book 1. The arguments Hume offers there have frequently been addressed by the secondary literature in a piecemeal fashion, especially his account of personal identity and of our belief in the external world. But I argue in HTS that they should be read as a sustained investigation of the human temptation to form philosophical systems. Consider its title: "Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy" (emphasis added). Hume, I suggest, is interested both in defending his own preferred approach to what he calls the "science of human nature" (T Intro. 9, 1.1.1.12, 1.2.5.19, 1.3.8.2; SBN xviii, 7, 60, 98), and explaining how the mind's structures lead other philosophers to succumb to certain characteristic errors. The outcome is a "true" scepticism (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273) in which we acknowledge that philosophical beliefs about the mind are not fundamentally different in kind from vulgar beliefs about the world: both depend on the associative tendencies built in to human nature and thus, do not equip us to penetrate into how things are independently of our cognitive capacities—their "real nature and operations" (T 1.2.5.25–26; SBN 63–64). It follows that there is no "obligation" to philosophize (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270), and it is domesticated into an activity that should be pursued only by those with an inclination for it (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270–71).

A central theme in HTS is the role of reflection in philosophy and in everyday life. I suggest that Hume holds that in everyday life, the "vulgar"—all of us most of the time (T 1.4.2.36; SBN 205)—are fully engaged by our reasoning and sensing. Thus, we are not normally aware of the mental mechanisms that Hume details throughout the *Treatise*, nor are we even aware of the perceptions that he takes to be the vehicles for our mental lives. Rather, we typically

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remain focused solely on that which our reasonings and sensings concern. In calculating a tip at a restaurant, for example, our thoughts concern only the bill. In going about our business in the world, we take ourselves to be moving in the same world of tables and chairs and trees as everyone else. In chapter 2, I argue that even this 'taking' is something we are not normally aware of. Instead, we carry along a mostly unarticulated and unrecognized assumption that we are in touch with the world.

I spend a fair amount of time in chapters 2 and 3 showing how Hume understands the mind to produce this assumption. I argue that a proper interpretation of the relevant material (especially T 1.2 and 1.4.2) requires that we see his empiricist theory of representation as being much more flexible than it is often taken to be, where the so-called copy principle—the requirement that every simple idea be derived from a prior simple impression—is treated dogmatically, as if Hume himself does not immediately qualify it, first, with the "missing shade of blue" (T 1.1.1.10; SBN 5–6), and shortly thereafter with his account of general ideas (T 1.1.7; SBN 17–25). In the latter, Hume argues that we are able to think of universals, despite never having impressions of them, because the imagination associates ideas of particular members of the kind in an appropriately structured manner when accompanied by a linguistic token. I take the linguistic dimension of Hume's account to be especially significant, in that it brings in a normative and social dimension (T 3.2.2.10; SBN 490) to his otherwise narrowly naturalistic and individualistic treatment of the mind. I argue that, for Hume, this set of associative and linguistic structures serves a *constitutive* role, enabling a thought to be of a kind, not by means of any single perception that represents it, but by the dynamics of the mind as regularized by language.

Hume characterizes fictions by saying that "[i]deas always represent the objects or impressions, from which they are deriv'd, and can never without a fiction represent or be apply'd to any other" (T 1.2.3.11; SBN 37; emphasis added). Insofar as a general idea represents a universal without being derived from it, it satisfies this characterization. Thus, I think we can appeal to something similar to the treatment of general ideas in understanding core fictions in Hume's account: the idea of the vacuum (T 1.2.5.1–27; SBN 53–64), of object persistence (T 1.2.5.28–29; SBN 64–65), and ultimately of external objects themselves (T 1.4.2.23–43; SBN 198–210). In particular, no sensory impression represents such an object on its own (it presents either an array of coloured and tangible points [T 1.2.3], or imagistic content that has no spatial content [T 1.4.5.7–16; SBN 234–40]). I take the core account in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" (T 1.4.2; hereafter "SwS") to show that the dynamics of the imagination as regularized by language enable impressions that are constant or coherent to represent the public world of objects around us. Indeed, this public world is in part constituted by our collectively having organized our experience in that fashion.

Though I take Hume to hold that, most of time, we are fully immersed in the perceptual processes that produce our mental lives, he allows that we can also step back from and reflect on them, both in everyday life and as a vehicle for philosophy. I spend a significant chunk of Chapter 4 (especially in §4.3) investigating how Hume accounts for our capacity to observe the mind. This issue is surprisingly neglected in Hume scholarship, but I argue that

he relies on the association of "secondary" ideas—ideas that are of "primary" impressions and ideas (T 1.1.1.11; SBN 6)—to produce beliefs that are analogous to those investigated in SwS, in this case the belief in the continued existence of perceptions in the mind even when we are not introspectively observing them, and the belief that they exist distinctly from our introspective observation of them (HTS 130–31). Philosophers are thus, for Hume, vulgar with respect to the mind, a point which plays an essential role in my interpretation of his scepticism, in that it leaves the epistemic credentials of introspective philosophical verdicts no better or worse than those of vulgar sensory verdicts.

Hume's consideration of scepticism is, as the name of the Part suggests, the dominant issue in T 1.4, and I discuss it in three chapters (chapters 1, 4, and 7). My strategy is to excavate the parallels between his scepticism with regard to reason (T 1.4.1; SBN 180–87) and with regard to the senses (T 1.4.2; SBN 187-218). In each case, we reflect on our minds, reasoning about the reliability of our reasoning, or introspectively observing the imagistic perceptions that purport to portray the world. In each case, there seems to be a sense in which we should give up on the verdicts we are examining. Hume famously says that we go on believing nonetheless (T 1.4.1.7, 1.4.2.50, 1.4.7.10; SBN 183, 214, 269). I argue that Hume emphasizes the resilience of our rational and sensory verdicts because he needs empirical evidence in favour of his model of the mind, where it is nothing but a bundle of related perceptions, without a superintending subject that decides whether to accept what our reasoning and sensing suggest. Sometimes he defends this model merely by "enter[ing] most intimately into" himself and reporting what he finds (T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252). But no doubt he knows that others claim to find something quite different when they introspect. Thus, I think that one point he is making in emphasizing our immunity to sceptical challenges is that, if we did need to make a decision to accept what reason and the senses tell us, we could be "total" (T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183) or "extravagant" (T 1.4.2.50, 1.4.4.6; SBN 214, 228) sceptics. Our incapacity to reach these negative conclusions is evidence that the mind is not so structured. We are not as such required to decide what to believe.

Nonetheless, we can reflect. We can ask whether we calculated the tip correctly, or whether the puddle that seems to be on the highway is an illusion. Normally we resolve these questions by reconsidering the evidence—recalculating or looking again. The sceptical challenges depend on maintaining the reflective posture, either by iterating our recalculations or persisting in our introspective observation of the mind. Why would we do this? I suggest that Hume's answer is that it is philosophy that pushes us into this special kind of reflection, one that is not satisfied until it can show that the verdict we are tempted by is how things really are (HTS §§1.4, 4.6, 7.5). There is nothing wrong with this endeavour. It is just that nothing requires it of us either. Some of us pursue it nonetheless because it "mixes itself with some propensity" (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) we happen to have. We find these kinds of abstruse investigations a "point of pleasure;" "this is the origin of . . . philosophy" (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271).

The problem is that, as we persist in these reflections, we start to lose the very things we were investigating. I call this the problem of reflective interference (HTS 37–38, 146–47, 240). Because reason and introspection depend on the same principles of association as

those the sceptical challenges use to attack reason and the senses, these principles start to break down. Both the challenges and the faculties they attack are undermined, leaving us merely with massive confusion of the kind exemplified in the climax of the "Conclusion of this book": "Where am I, or what? . . . I . . . begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty" (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 269). We are thus to learn that philosophy cannot accomplish some of the tasks it sets itself because of its tendency to get in the way of itself. In escaping from the sceptical crisis by playing backgammon or dining with friends (T 1.4.7.9; SBN 269), Hume shows, however, that philosophy's incapacity to answer some of its most fundamental questions is a problem for philosophy, not for everyday life. Because we do not need a verdict on the ultimate warrant for our reasoning or sensing, we can go on reasoning and sensing as well as we ever did (or even better, thanks to Hume's excavation of rules for causal reasoning in Treatise 1.3.15).

In chapters 5 and 6, I discuss Hume's "examination [of] some general systems both ancient and modern, which have been propos'd" of the "external and internal world" (T 1.4.2.57; SBN 218) in Sections 3 through 6 of Book 1, Part 4 of the Treatise. These systems count as forms of what he calls "false" philosophy (T 1.4.3.9; see also 1.3.14.27, 1.4.7.13; SBN 223, 168, 272). The ancient philosophers search for a deep foundation for our beliefs, one that would ground them in something radically mind-independent, such as fundamental substances that would underlie the world (T 1.4.3; SBN 219–25) or the mind (T 1.4.5; SBN 232–51). It might seem that Hume here ascribes to them a task that, on his own view, should not even be thinkable. Not having impressions of a deep foundation for sensible qualities or perceptions, we should not be able to have an idea of such a thing. But I argue that his brief invocation of our capacity to use "relative" ideas to conceive of something "specifically different" from our human ways of thinking (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68; HTS §3.3.2) allows him to characterize what the ancients seek. He and they can negatively recognize that there are human limits to cognition through a denial of all that human nature contributes to our conception of the world. The problem is that the ancients also want to give a positive characterization of what they take to be the deep structure of things. Hume, I argue, thinks that any such attempt must end in failure if it tries to say more than that the world absolutely independent of our perspective is how it would appear if per impossibile we removed our ways of thinking from our conception of it. The ancients go wrong by trying to describe how things are from the outside of the human perspective, while—inevitably—staying within it.

The modern philosophers make a different mistake. I have noted that, for Hume, philosophers are vulgar with respect to the mind. Just as the vulgar take themselves to get the world right without giving our perceptual access to it any mind, the moderns take themselves to get the mind right without giving our introspective access to it any mind. Thus, they think that our beliefs about the external world are problematic, in need of a categorization in terms of those sensations that are accurate (those of primary qualities) and those that give us mere appearances (those of secondary qualities) (T 1.4.4; SBN 225–31). They also think that we have a special intimate knowledge of our minds that guarantees our grasp of its simplicity

and identity (T 1.4.6.1; SBN 251). In fact, our beliefs about our minds are no better or worse than the vulgar's beliefs about the world.[3]

NOTES

1 References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph number, and to Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by the page number.

2 Robert Fogelin's Hume's *Skeptical Crisis* focuses on the same texts, but does not aim to present a fully detailed analysis (see ix–x, 8).

3 The final chapter of HTS addresses Hume's second thoughts about personal identity in the "Appendix" to the *Treatise,* where I argue that his initial treatment in "Of personal identity" (T 1.4.6) cannot account for the belief in the unity of the reflecting mind with the mind being reflected upon. He originally explained the belief in the simplicity and identity of the mind on the basis of the association of secondary ideas of introspectively observed primary perceptions (T 1.4.6.14, App. 20; SBN 258, 635). There is not a problem so long as the secondary ideas remain are invisible to the one having them—as is normally the case for philosophers who, being vulgar with respect to the mind, are not normally thinking of the secondary ideas that afford them their introspective beliefs. But, as a true sceptic who understands his irremediable vulgarity in his philosophy and in everyday life, Hume comes to believe that there are unobserved secondary ideas being associated in the mind without any explanation of why we believe them to be in the same mind as those perceptions they represent.

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